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SUBJECT: CONFERENCE ON "THE ROLE OF PRECAUTION IN GMO
POLICY"

Summary

¶1. On April 18-19, the Austrian EU Presidency hosted an experts meeting on the precautionary principle in the context of agricultural biotechnology. The meeting aimed to reinforce the role of the precautionary principle in agricultural biotechnology. The conference revealed differences among participants from the Member States, the Commission, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academics on application, but there was overwhelming support to strengthen precautionary rules. The only U.S. participant was Margaret Mellon from the Union of Concerned Scientists. During opening remarks, Austrian Minister of Health Maria Rauch-Kallat repeated the GoA view that the EU needs common rules on biotech co-existence and liability. End summary.

Political and Regulatory Context

¶2. German scientist and NGO activist Christine von Weizaecker argued that application of the precautionary principle was valid even when there is no scientific evidence for a risk. She criticized "sound science" as a political tool designed to delay safety obligations or bans on potentially harmful technologies.

¶3. Kathryn Tierny from DG Environment voiced a clear commitment to the precautionary principle, exhorting risk assessors and risk managers to work more closely in deciding what actions to take to protect human health and the environment in light of current scientific knowledge.

¶4. Liina Eek from the Estonian Ministry of Environment discussed the implementation of the precautionary principle in a Central and East European (CEE) context. Until countries establish functional biosafety frameworks, most CEE countries would try to restrict GMO imports. She noted that legislation in all the CEE countries contains the precautionary principle, but each country defines it differently.

Scientific Community

¶5. Brian Wynne from Lancaster University's Centre for the

Study of Environmental Change led a discussion on risk assessment and precaution. He detailed the difference between risk assessment (assessment of a known risk with a certain probability) and precaution (considering an unknown risk). He opined that science could not avoid the unpredictable, therefore justifying precaution.

¶16. Juergen Zentek from the Free University of Berlin pointed out that existing research methods cannot always detect the harmful risks of existing GMOs. Christopher Pollok from the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research in Wales discussed farm-level evaluations of herbicide tolerant crops carried out in the United Kingdom. He concluded that authorities should regulate all novel crops in the same manner as they regulate genetically modified crops.

Conference Conclusions

¶17. The conference generated three conclusions: 1) conference participants overwhelmingly agreed that current EU precautionary rules are not strict enough; 2) the conference revealed significant differences amongst scientists and regulators on the precise definition of the precautionary principle; and 3) all experts agreed that precaution is an important tool for GMO policy, but that there are differences of opinion as to how to apply the principle.

¶18. For any additional information on the conference, please contact Embassy's Agricultural Specialist by e-mail: roswitha.krautgartner@usda.gov.